

Sustainable Resource Management in Action: Tourism

September, 2003

Tourism in British Columbia is a major component of the economy. In 2000, tourism generated \$10 billion in revenues and provided direct, full-time employment for 130,000 British Columbians. Tourism generated \$1 billion in net revenues to the government of B.C. and the sector continues to grow at a rate of 4 to 5 per cent annually.

Tourists come to British Columbia primarily for its high-quality natural environment — wilderness, scenery, wildlife, fish and more. The province has cornered a strong market share of this natural-resource based industry.

When an industry is so dependent on the quality of the natural environment, it is extremely important that it seek to develop practices and plans that preserve the value of that environment in perpetuity. Tourism operations also need to be mindful of the social and cultural impacts of their activities —in terms of the jobs they create, the cultural activities that may be part of the tourism experience, and the communities where they are located.

Tourism needs to strike a balance between its economic viability, environmental conservation, and social impacts. Sustainable tourism is an industry that endeavours to minimize its impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate income, employment, and the conservation of local ecosystems.

The World Trade Organization states that, "sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunity for the future...leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems."

Particularly in the wilderness and eco-tourism areas, business owners are very aware that the long-term success of the industry depends on their being stewards of the environment. These operators know that there is a strong and rapidly growing market niche for the kinds of activities they provide, but they also know that the market is well educated and demanding in its expectations around sustainable business practices.

Moving towards sustainable resource management

A number of organizations in British Columbia, Canada and around the world are spearheading the need for a sustainable approach to tourism. The following are some steps the tourism sector is taking.

Sustainable Tourism Certification

The Sustainable Tourism Association of Canada is developing an accreditation program for tourism operators, similar to certification systems used for sustainably harvested forestry products. Tourism operators will seek certification through the association, which will act as an independent third-party that develops standards, sets accepted levels of performance, audits for compliance, and identifies exemplary operators. The result is what the association refers to as a

"clear, comprehensive accreditation program designed to reflect Canada's environmental, social and cultural diversity."

Sharing ideas and plans

The International Year of EcoTourism in 2002 gave rise to an international conference in Quebec City that was a catalyst for tourism operators to become engaged in sustainability issues. There are now many opportunities for operators to share their ideas and business practices to reduce the size of their ecological footprint and become more sustainable. A number of organizations provide Web sites with online resources, hold conferences and workshops, and provide a forum for tourism operators to share best practices.

Developing best practices

Many sectors of the tourism industry are recognizing the need for developing best practices in their operations. For example, the whale-watching industry on Vancouver Island has grown rapidly and has become a major attraction for tourists to the area. Government biologists and many of the operators realized that in order for the industry to continue, it needed to ensure that the whale populations were not being harmed in any way by the whale watchers. Through a collaborative effort between the U.S. and Canadian governments and the whale-watching industry, a set of guidelines for whale watching has been developed that are supported by all stakeholders involved. These best practices for whale watching include such things as minimum distance between boats and the whales, how best to approach a pod of whales, and recommendations on speed and noise levels around these marine mammals.

Codes of Conduct

The BC Wilderness Tourism Association has developed a Code of Conduct for this rapidly growing area. Operators commit to a series of principles to ensure their activities are environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. The principles include a broad range of topics including resource conservation, recycling, staff training, client education and community responsibility. Members of the association are working collaboratively to make the Code of Conduct a more effective and useful tool for their industry.

Working with the traditional resource industry

There are exciting opportunities for the consumptive and non-consumptive sectors of the resource industry to work together. For example, located in the Central Coast mountains of B.C. is a premier bear and wildlife viewing lodge. A forest company was proposing to log the second growth timber on a viewscape right opposite the lodge. The logging company and the lodge owners came to an agreement to selectively log the forests and maintain the incredible view that tourists at the lodge appreciated. Not only did this decision make environmental sense, but also the revenue from the tourists coming to view wildlife at the lodge far exceeds that generated from a one-time cutting of the trees in the viewscape. An added benefit for both the forest company and the lodge owners has been that the agreement has raised their profiles in the community as good corporate citizens.

Value-added tourism

Most communities recognize that natural resources such as scenic views, fish or forests, can form the basis of a tourism industry. However, they need to look at all the ways the natural resource

"product" can be marketed so as to maximize the value of the resource. Forest companies often talk of getting the most out of wood fibre by creating new value-added products; in the same way tourism operators can think of getting more tourism opportunities from their natural resources.

The tourism industry is fast becoming a significant contributor to the B.C. economy. Tourism, particularly wilderness and eco-tourism, is often seen as being relatively benign in its impacts on the environment and communities, when compared to traditional resource industries. However, over time the subtle effects of tourism activities could have a profound impact on the long-term sustainability of the industry.

Sustainable Resource Management in Action is a series of topic papers developed to provide a better understanding of the province's approach to sustainable resource management. For more information and titles of other papers in the series visit: www.gov.bc.ca/srm

